

2-2009

As I See It: Mission to Youth Today – A Response

Noel Cooper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc>

Recommended Citation

Cooper, N. (2009). As I See It: Mission to Youth Today – A Response. *Spiritan Magazine*, 33 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol33/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Mission to Youth Today — A Response

Noel Cooper

Fr. George Boran's articles in *Spiritans* for February, May and August 2008, offer several observations about young people in today's "post-modern" society. Increasing numbers of young people have become disaffiliated with the faith community, sometimes on principle, and sometimes out of apathy or disinterest. If we hope to call them back, we must respect their point of view, and perhaps even change some of our own traditional positions. Mission To Youth Today offers perceptive opinions about the relationship of today's young people to the church.

Faith is especially an encounter with a person, Jesus Christ. The acceptance of Jesus means the acceptance of his teaching, of his lifestyle, his world vision, and his formula for human happiness.

Tragically, the decisive reason for the failure of the older generation to pass on the faith is that so few people (including priests, teachers and parents) give evidence of a flourishing relationship with Jesus and an inspirational understanding of his vision.

The only hope for cracking the walls of indifference around contemporary generations is contagious discipleship. Post-modern true believers, where are you?

The sacred

There is a return to some sort of spirituality that will give answer the deeper needs of the human person ... but unfortunately, the institutional church is not satisfying that thirst.

The spirituality that appeals to many today is privatized, self-centred, superficial, new age, vague and independent of organized religion.

I agree with the direction of these observations, but would prefer to amend the descriptors that are intentionally negative. I believe that young people today are



developing a valid spirituality independent of organized religion. In keeping with the democratic and individualistic spirit of the past 300 years, thoughtful young people are seeking strong self-esteem (not self-centredness) based on respect for themselves and others.

The institutional church is not satisfying their thirst for a valid spirituality. Regrettably, all of us have failed to express the “good news” of the New Testament in a way that supports their quest for wholeness in life.

Priority of the subjective

An important aspect of postmodern culture is the shift from a collective to a private ideal ... Youth focus on the problems of daily life ... and retreat to the private sphere to search for meaning there. These young people do not seek to change society from within — they prefer to live on its margins.

People of ancient times didn't understand their lives as individually important, but as meaningful to the extent that they contributed to the community.

However, today's emphasis on the individual can be a valid extension of Jesus' offer of wholeness to those who accept the saving action of God. Christianity itself has emphasized the value of the individual with its emphasis on personal morality and the teaching that life after death would be based on reward for each person's good deeds.

Jesus' brilliant paradoxical insight is that we will be most truly ourselves if we give ourselves in love to others. He didn't support traditional religious ordinances; he proclaimed that God would support each of us on our journey towards wholeness. The great impediment to personal wholeness, for adults as well as youth, is not “private ideal” but selfishness. We adult believers must inspire young people to build their wholeness on self-esteem and self-giving love in openness to God's saving power.

Certainly we should help students become involved in their communities, but we must realize that many of them belong to a great many communities, and church is very low on their list of affiliations. Both students and parents are involved in their family, their school or workplace, their communities of friendships and their recreational communities, as well as “society.” At best for most people, church comes after all those other communities as “something which I care about.”

Interior silence

Many young people have difficulty with being alone. The process of taking control of one's own life and building a personality ... should not depend on the opinions of the peer group.

My perception is that most young people do look within, and wonder about their abilities and disabilities, about how they appear to others, and about the meaning of their lives. Most parents would probably complain that their beloved offspring have an active interior life, but that they refuse to communicate it to their elders.

Peer groups are of great value for most young people. Friends lovingly promote each other's self-esteem, smarten them up when they do something stupid, and cooperate in solving problems and dealing with the future. Students whose families are dysfunctional often rely on their peers for everything that their family should be giving them. Of course, some groups of friends are negative influences, and students should recognize harmful friendships and make decisions to find better friends for their own good.

Relationships

Youth have an intense desire to establish relationships with one another.

Educators should promote healthy relationships, with the recognition that some of these will be characterized by increasing intimacy. Our teaching should not be based on “thou shalt not”, but on something as fundamental as exploring the implications of honesty, equality and responsibility as characteristics of healthy relationships.

Emotions and crisis of values

Emotions have taken over from reason and science among today's youth ... it (can be) a positive shift ... However, “how I feel” has become the major criterion on what is right and wrong. Pleasure is frequently considered an absolute value ... The demands of solidarity and justice are frequently not taken into account ... Everything goes. There are no objective criteria.

We rightly say that emotion must be balanced by reason, but we rarely say that reason must be balanced by our feelings. In most cases, our emotions tell us the truth. To ignore impassioned expressions



of opinion with clichés like “don’t get emotional” is to risk rejecting important insights. If you’re delighted about something, believe that it’s good for you. If you feel that the requirements of love ask you to break a traditional directive, you may be right. As Boran says, we must learn to respect all the dimensions of human personality in presenting the gospel message.

Re pleasure: Jesus was not ascetic. (See his saying contrasting his approach to John the Baptist’s in Mt 11:18-19.) But our tradition is imbued with a negative attitude towards pleasure. Of course, pleasure should not become an “absolute value” overriding the well being of oneself and others. Pleasure should be accepted for what it is — a God-given delight.

Solidarity and justice are “frequently not taken into account” by *anyone* in our society, youth or adult. In spite of what we would prefer to believe, money and power are the primary motivating factors in most people’s lives. Jesus knew that well; his teachings about the dangers of wealth “terrify us” with their radical demands, as Pope Benedict stated in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Few North American adults consider solidarity and justice to be primary values in their economic lives. Don’t blame youth. They’re only copying what they see in their elders’ behaviour.

“Everything goes. There are no objective criteria.” In my opinion this is a false characterization of contemporary teenage decision-making. For a variety of reasons, young people are developing their own standards of behaviour, which are in some ways more correct than the values that the tradition seeks to impose. They may be mistaken in some cases, but I believe that we elders have been mistaken as well. Believers tend to decry the secular value system, but often secular values are more supportive of human rights than traditional teaching.

*Most young people do look within,
and wonder about their abilities
and disabilities, about how
they appear to others,
and about the meaning
of their lives.*

Permanent commitment

To commit oneself to something for a lifetime is considered impossible ... No one choice is seen as definitive.

I wonder about the possibility of binding lifelong commitment.

The intention to make marriage last for life (for example) is a good intention, but even in the New Testament exceptions were made for certain types of marriage breakdown. Jesus’ moral wisdom about lifelong marriage is true wisdom: it enunciates what is truly best. But factors like unfaithfulness and brutality towards spouse and children sometimes make divorce the correct choice. Subsequently, people who have suffered marriage breakdown may try again to live according to the wisdom of Jesus in a new marriage. The challenge for every believer is to apply the wisdom of Jesus to the circumstances of one’s own life.

Begin where they are

To identify how we can help young people hear God’s call in the midst of so many other voices, it is important that we begin where young people actually are in terms of their personal needs and feelings.

Start with their interests. The new priority they give to needs and feelings is a good thing ... We are not going to win them over by just talking at them ... Some of these interests are: to love and be loved; to be recognized; to have material security in order to develop other aspects of life; to have emotional fulfillment in interpersonal relationships; to be kind and to be treated kindly; to give meaning to one’s life; to transcend oneself; to be part of a human group and to count on it for dealing with life’s challenges and for building a better world.

This section is pure gold. It’s worth re-reading and remembering.

Most young people are besieged with fast-moving stimulation and are not inspired by traditional value systems. “Many church leaders speak a language and represent a value system that does not appeal to young people.”

Work on the language we use

In describing a successful training course for youth leaders in Latin America, Father Boran emphasizes how its Christian leaders had integrated the following biblical spirituality in their lives:

The seed must die to give much fruit; the redemptive value of the cross and of the power that lies in weakness; the resurrection that comes through an experience of suffering.

Beautiful as those ideas are, the language is precisely the traditional symbolic language that Fr. Boran admits does not appeal to young people. It doesn’t help to tell a young person who is failing in school that “the seed must die before it can bear fruit;” you can’t tell a youth who is flipping hamburgers and lusting after hot wheels about the power that lies in weakness. We have to work on the language we use to convey these beautiful ideas. We have to realize that many young people are not good at poetry, and if we use religious platitudes we may have lost them forever. That’s why my children’s generation are living thoughtful and principled lives while their religious foundation is only a faint memory. ■

Noel Cooper is a retired Catholic teacher.